DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 654 EA 018 026

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TITLE Using Political Theory to Improve Local Decision Making.
PUB DATE 30 Mar 85
NOTE 27p.; AERA.85
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; *Administrator Education; Elections; Elementary Secondary Education; *Politics of Education; School Attitudes; Social Theories; Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS *Dissatisfaction Theory; Washington

ABSTRACT

Seven school superintendents in the state of Washington with varying levels of exposure to Iannacone and Lutz's dissatisfaction theory of democracy as well as varying degrees of experience with electoral conflict in their careers were interviewed to determine the level of their understanding of the theory, their acceptance of it, their ability to apply it, and their desire for more information on conflict levels in their districts. The executive directors of the state school boards association and the school administration association were also interviewed. The researchers concluded that practitioners in the field of school administration have not received much information concerning dissatisfaction theory, though they are receptive to the theory when it is described in the context of electoral data with which they are familiar. Graduate studies offer the best format for educating superintendents concerning the theory, and the most effective method for presentation is to provide multiple sessions during which superintendents can obtain guidance in applying the theory to their own situations. This paper discusses the various responses of the superintendents and state educational leaders interviewed, suggests conclusions that can be drawn, and recommends policies for encouraging wider awareness of the theory. (PGD)

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USING POLITICAL THEORY TO IMPROVE LOCAL DECISION MAKING

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A paper presented at the Annual Meeting
of the American Educational Research Association,
Chicago, Illinois, March 30, 1985

EA 018 026

USING POLITICAL THEORY TO IMPROVE LOCAL DECISION MAKING

The dissatisfaction theory of democracy developed by Iannacone and Lutz (1970) has received considerable attention in the academic press over the past years. It has always been intended that the theory would be useful to practitioners. There appears, however, to be little mention of the theory in publications and meetings of professional associations of practicing administrators. Are superintendents aware of the dissatisfaction theory? Do they see early signs of conflict in their communities? Are they able to respond to a mandate to change from their communities? In attempting to address these questions, the present research hoped to further the application of political theory to decision making in the practice of educational administration.

BACKGROUND

A good deal of research has been conducted on the dissatisfaction theory as it relates to local school district political activity. Iannacone and Lutz originally developed an explanatory model through their midwestern study which has come to be known as the Robertsdale case (1970). The model was verified in California through three studies done at Claremont (Kirkendall, 1966; Walden, 1966; Freeborn, 1966). Additional research has refined and extended the theory under a number of circumstances and over a number of years (Moen, 1971; LeDoux, 1971; Garberina, 1975; Mitchell, 1978;

Thorsted, 1974; Criswell and Mitchell, 1980).

This particular line of research has always been closely linked to practice. Lutz and Iannacone described research and practice as "inextricably interrelated, each advancing the other as the right leg advances the left, but then must pause to allow the left to advance the right" (p. vii). Criswell and Mitchell pointed out practical implictions in 1980. They stated that the eight to ten year process of a conflict episode allowed school board incumbents and school executives to modify policy positions in light of citizen demands. They expressed the hope that superintendents could recognize and respond to a citizen's mandate to change.

Today the body of literature spans a period of fifteen years. The theory has reached a stage of maturity and refinement that allows it to have many implications for practicing school administrators. Superintendents who are familiar with the theory should be able to recognize early signs of community dissatisfaction and make on-going assessments of its magnitude. This may help superintendents and school boards to decide the importance of making various policy changes in response to community demands, thus avoiding the trauma associated with incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover.

School board members and superintendents in Washington State have become interested in electoral stability and the political process. A decade ago they came under fire in a wave of post-Watergate accountability; they felt the impact

of open meeting laws, financial disclosure laws, potential liability suits ranging from football injuries to rights to pray or display a Christmas creche. Most recently, the quality and funding of schools have become the focus of concern with changing but ill-defined responsibility for funding education between local units and the state. In Washington, as in other states, ad hoc groups have formed to make recommendations on school improvement, focused primarily on increasing academic rigor.

Interest has been piqued to study the high rate of incumbent defeat. Washington State School Director's Association and Washington Association of School Administrators undertook a survey of superintendents and school board presidents in districts experiencing incumbent defeat (1984). Findings from this study revealed that the only issues which seemed significant in the election were the relationship of a board member to the community and special interest groups, the board member's controversial style and the board member's lack of visibility or action. Substantive issues such as controversy over curriculum, declining enrollment, or athletics were not identified as important in the outcome of the election. Differences between the defeated incumbent and the successful challenger were largely campaign intensity (expenditure of money, number of campaign activities, endorsement by special interest groups) as opposed to personal characteristics (community leader, name familiarity).

Simultaneously, with the research conducted by the associations, another study was being conducted by a group at Washington State University (Emmingham and Rawson, 1984). Using the dissatisfaction theory of Iannacone and Lutz, they examined a twenty-year history of five neighboring school districts in the state of Washington. Their study, reported separately in this symposium, attempted to compare levels of electoral conflict over a period of time in order to determine if conflict is linked on a regional basis, and if the level of conflict might be related to demographic or economic variables in "boom and bust" times. Emmingham and Rawson found that, indeed, current levels of conflict, as calculated by the Thorsted Conflict Index (Thorsted, 1974), were higher than at some periods in the past, but, more importantly, they found that conflict cycles were related on a regional level to population change and the economic health of the region.

PURPOSE

School executives could have learned about the dissatisfaction theory in a number of ways. These include post-graduate college classes, scholarly literature, professional journals and professional association meetings. Several important questions now arise:

1. What level of understanding do school executives have of the dissatisfaction theory?
2. Are school executives able to identify signs of a citizen's mandate to change?

3. Are school executives able to modify policy in response to demands from citizens?

As a step toward answering these questions, the present research attempted to ascertain the level of understanding of the dissatisfaction theory among a group of superintendents and state leaders. The study further attempted to reveal the most effective methods of educating superintendents about the theory and leading them to apply it in the administration of their school systems.

PROCEDURES

Two seminars had been conducted for administrators in the region studied by Emmingham and Rawson. The first seminar was two hours long followed by another hour of discussion in a social setting; it was attended by a small group including two superintendents and a number of other administrators. The data was presented for each of the districts studied and lengthy discussions ensued regarding interpretation and application. A second presentation was made about three months later to the local superintendent's association. This was about one hour in length and was attended by about forty people, most of whom were superintendents. The superintendents who had attended the first seminar also attended this second presentation. In addition, two meetings were held with the executive director of Washington State School Director's Association and Washington Association of School Administrators to present and explain the project.

Following these seminars, interviews were conducted with a number of superintendents in order to determine the level of their understanding and ability to apply the theory, their acceptance of the theory and their desire for more information on conflict levels in their districts.

Eight superintendents were identified who had varying degrees of exposure to the dissatisfaction theory. Two had attended both the seminar and the hour presentation. Two had attended only the hour presentation, one had heard the hour presentation and had extensive knowledge of the theory through graduate study and two had never heard of the theory. Originally an eighth superintendent, with extensive knowledge of the theory through graduate study, had been included in the sample, but was unable to be interviewed. These superintendents had varying degrees of experience with conflict in their careers (see Figure 1).

Superintendent's Exposure to Dissatisfaction Theory

Experience with Electoral Conflict	None	1 Hour	3 Hours	Graduate Study
yes	1	1	1	1
no	1	1	1	1

Figure 1. Design of Study

Each was asked a series of questions about how he assesses the level of community satisfaction with the schools, whether the current level of conflict is high or low, increasing or decreasing, how he becomes aware of potential areas of conflict, recent electoral events, and several questions about the relationship of the school board to the community and to the superintendent.

Interviews were also conducted with state leaders to determine their level of understanding of the dissatisfaction theory, their ability to apply it and their willingness to educate others to learn about and apply the theory. The executive director of the state school boards' association and the executive director of the school administration association were identified as key leaders and interviewed.

FINDINGS

A problem encountered early in the seminar and workshop effort was the difficulty of getting the attention of superintendents. Superintendents are busy people and guard their time carefully; they tend to allocate time only to their higher priorities. When invitations were extended to five superintendents for the first seminar, only two were able to attend. When the second presentation was made, it was at a regional superintendent's meeting. In this setting, a larger audience was assured, but greater time constraints were imposed.

In both the seminar and the hour presentation, there was greater involvement on the part of superintendents than other

administrators. They asked more questions and expressed stronger opinions. When superintendents first hear the presentation, there appears to be an initial rejection of the theory. There is a rush of explanations of the data which are specific to certain incidents. Superintendents said things like, "There was a lot of conflict then because of the football coach." This initial rejection seems to be followed by a period of contemplation in which the theory is applied to one's own situation. If it fits current indicators of conflict, the superintendent tends to interpret the theory as predicting inevitable superintendent dismissal, an interpretation which can be alarming. If there are no current signs of conflict, superintendents tend to ask questions about usefulness or potential application of theory.

Superintendents generally have little prior knowledge of the dissatisfaction theory. Of the seven interviewed, only two had read of the Iannacone and Lutz literature in their graduate studies. No one remembered seeing articles in any of the journals they read regularly.

Superintendent Harris

Superintendent Harris had heard both presentations of the theory. His district is in a rural setting near a larger community to which it is strongly tied. Harris came to this position after 25 years in another small community in Washington. He is the third superintendent in a short period of time in his district which has had a high Thorsted Conflict Index for a number of years. In his interview, he

expressed a good understanding and acceptance of the material which was presented about community change. He was tolerant of conflict:

> I've been in the business a long time and just knew there would always be conflict. When I came here, I didn't talk to many people, but I looked at the community and saw that it had grown fast, from a farm community to a bedroom community. You know that that kind of change will bring conflict. You just look at the demographics.

Harris did not seem to understand that a board which is isolated from community sources of conflict is apt to be subject to continued challenge. When asked about recent board changes, Harris praised his new board highly. "The board has improved 150%. We had an arena board and we've gone to an elite board or at least are moving that way. All that conflict was getting to people. They were tired of it." He seemed pleased with the new direction of the board and predicts lower conflict in the future.

While demonstrating some understanding of the dissatisfaction theory, Harris had not done much investigation of previous conflicts, other than what was presented at the seminar. When asked if there had been controversy over a new administration building, he first said no, then asked his secretary, who told him that there was considerable controversy over the location and that the first bond issue

had been defeated.

Harris expressed some frustration in making contacts with the community because of the social dominance of the larger neighboring community where people work, shop, attend church and join organizations. Opposition to the schools in the smaller community seemed to be led by a few individuals. Harris had no idea how these people made contact in the small community, if in fact they did.

Superintendent Abercrombie

Superintendent Abercrombie had heard both presentations. With fifteen years in his district, he is the superintendent of longest tenure in the region. There is annual speculation that he will retire. His present district has grown rapidly and experienced a number of incidents of high conflict. Abercrombie served previously in a district that had experienced a total board recall.

Like Harris, he accepted conflict as part of the job. "I've probably become placebound, but that's not how I started out. I tell my board, I was looking for a job when I came here, what do I care if I have to do it again." He saw school conflict as rooted in community dynamics, although he still tended to take it personally:

> I've seen a lot of communities. Those that are in real conflict like Edgewood (his previous district), the schools were the battlefield about what power figures were going to emerge in the community. It was a

> battle between the old folks and the new folks. The old doctors and lawyers were fading from the scene. The new group got in too big a hurry--the old ones weren't dead yet. I came in after the recall. When I got there, the two factions hated each other. I kept my mouth shut--talked to a lot of people. It was an interesting situation. I sought it out--I didn't care if I stayed. One thing you can always count on is that people get tired of fighting. They'll fight when it's important.

Abercrombie tried to anticipate conflict; he also seemed to understand that conflict stemmed from attitudes and values, not specific actions:

> To handle conflict, you have to look ahead and see where it's going to come from. You have to have people savvy. It's how people feel rather than the real situation. It's how people feel about what's going on rather than what's really going on. You have to be able to deal with them on a feeling level.

Superintendent Abercrombie had a good notion of the powerful groups in the community and how they jockied for power:

> When I first came here (a former board member) said, "Did you ever have an old Fordson

> tractor? They would bump around and toss around!" He said, "Hillside is like a Fordson tractor, you can kind of herd it, but you can't drive it!" When I first came here, I asked Gwen Davis about who runs Hillside. She said there are three groups, the old-time farmers, the scientist-engineers and the downtown businessmen. They don't talk to each other so no one really runs Hillside. Times have changed. The business community has broadened, there are fewer farmers, but it's still the same groups. That's what the city council recall is about--the businessmen against the engineers.

Abercrombie had good access to community leaders through groups he attends. He sees key people in the three groups he previously described, including a judge and a newspaper columnist, at his church, the Chamber of Commerce, United Way, an investment club about which he says, "We've met once a month for years. We talk about everything in the communities." The former newspaper publisher was active in these groups, but the paper changed hands recently. Abercrombie's district has received a lot of criticism in the press lately.

When asked if the dissatisfaction theory and data was useful, he responded enthusiastically, "Yes, it gives me some clues, some theoretical base to judge my own experience."

Abercrombie first relied on his own intuition and experience.

Superintendent Rowe

Superintendents who had attended only the one-hour presentation did not have such a clear notion of the link between community change and conflict. Superintendent Rowe lived in a very stable community with little conflict. He said, "In our community, things happen that upset people, but there just isn't much support for people who are anti-school. It's just not accepted to be anti-school." They have had some change in board membership, incumbents have resigned to run for other political offices. Two candidates ran an intense campaign. One was elected by a big majority, but the other is described as a good candidate and will probably be appointed to a position recently vacated.

Rowe, who had read the Robertsdale case in a graduate class, said, "The board says they represent different segments of the community, but they really don't." He described a community in which school board members run for office as a civic duty. These board members were representative of the same managerial segments of the community and tended to behave in the same, traditional style once on the board.

This superintendent had several questions about applying the dissatisfaction theory. He asked if a superintendent should encourage 5/0 (unanimous) votes by board members. He also questioned the utility of the theory, asking, "Is there anything you can really do to stop conflict? Each situation

is so different and when you find it out, it's too late."

Superintendent Edwards

The other superintendent, Edwards, who had only heard a one-hour presentation, expressed immediate frustration and rejection of the theory. He was willing to be interviewed at a later date. Edwards had made a recent career of going to districts experiencing conflict. He had come to Ridgemont during a severe economic decline.

> No one knew how much trouble we were in. I didn't know the extent of the problem when I came here. We were spending $1 million more each year than we were taking in. There was trouble in the whole economic structure. I saw this as a fat cat district that was spoiled. We had to get people's attention so we threatened to close most schools, any of the in-town schools could have been closed. This way everybody's ox was gored. It scared the hell out of the board. I decided we should use the conflict which was inevitable to our advantage. The board thought I was crazy.

Edwards did not link the closing of schools to subsequent board changes. He said, "The two board members didn't run again, but it didn't have anything to do with that. Jim wanted to run again, but his wife wouldn't let him. Ann wanted to work, she works for us now." There were

two candidates for each position and another incumbent was challenged but won. Right after that, another board member resigned to move to another community. The new member, who was appointed by the board, is described as very different from the rest of the board, a liberal democrat, but so far, not voting against the others. Edwards thinks he might oppose them on a future issue of property sales.

Edwards gets information from a number of community sources. He describes himself as assessing the community intuitively.

> I talk to a whole lot of people and try to listen to what they are thinking, not what they are saying. People in the grocery store, at the gas station, I find a way to talk about schools. Where I get my hair cut, I always ask her what people are saying. Sometimes people tell me things I don't want to hear

He described a similar process in his previous superintendency where he talked to a number of community segments. "I found out about powerful people behind the scenes."

Edwards has a reputation for being willing to confront opposition. "I used to think conflict was negative, now I think what's important is how you are perceived to handle conflict. Are you fair, do you listen, do you have the guts to do what's right."

Like Abercrombie, Edwards tends to manage conflict by anticipating the sources of opposition. He goes one step

further in that he conveys this information to the board to prepare them for conflict. Edwards describes himself in a very active role, strongly influencing the board:

> They like the strength of leadership. They hire me to run the schools. I have a better understanding of the community than the board because they tend to interact with their own type of people. I've been down the conflict road before. I can tell them what to expect, like when we were going to close schools and were getting ready for the public hearings. I told them what to expect. You have to condition them to conflict. You have to teach people to handle conflict.

Edwards also understands that he must not appear to totally dominate the board. He gave examples of times he established a set of choices for the board. Choices which are unsatisfactory to Edwards simply aren't presented to the board.

> When we closed schools, I never recommended which ones to close. Once we determined that it was possible to close any of three, they never did know my opinion on the final choice. They made the decision. It's important that the board be perceived as being in control."

Other Superintendents

Superintendents who had had no exposure to the

dissatisfaction theory talked considerably less. They described their community segments and the plans for maintaining contact with each. They seemed to have a lot of confidence in their ability to involve various segments of the community in their formal committees. They did not add the detail received in the other interviews. They described their changing boards and community change or lack of it, but made no connections between the two. They never mentioned numbers of candidates for board position. When asked about previous elections, they had accurate information, but made no connections. One superintendent clearly failed to see the insular nature of his board. He described a board with tenure of one to 15 years. He said, "We've had no challengers. We have a tradition of selection board members. Folks get together and say who should run." When asked which folks made that decision, he answered, "Largely former board members." He described the board as representative of community groups, but upon further questioning, it was clear that they represented a managerial class of several local businesses.

One superintendent who had extensive knowledge of the dissatisfaction theory in his graduate studies had only been in his district six months. It was his first superintendency; nevertheless, he demonstrated the clearest and most subtle understanding of the theory. He provided an elaborate description of community segments (geographic and religion), historical conflicts and plans for assessing the informal

power structure of the community. His district is a rural one with several small centers of population. Because he was aware that these centers have been the focus of past conflicts, he is planning to implement school site committees to allow each community to have a voice in how their own school is run. He relied on principals to tell him who the community leaders are. He was the only superintendent in the area who was able to keep in touch with the Hispanic community; he did this through an Hispanic employee who attends every board meeting and had convinced him to appoint Hispanics to some committees.

State Leaders

State leaders had never heard of the dissatisfaction theory. They had recently participated in some research on school board elections (Sharratt, 1984) and were surprised by the high rate of incumbent defeat. Sharratt had based his study on an assumption that is contradictory to the dissatisfaction theory, i.e., that public involvement in the form of willingness to run in school board elections indicates satisfaction with schools. These leaders expressed the same incident specific view of conflict as did the superintendents who had little knowledge of the dissatisfaction theory. They had recently conducted their own research exploring incumbent defeat from an issue oriented point of view; they had asked which issues were likely to lead to incumbent defeat. Leaders of the school board association and the superintendent's association expressed

great interest in the dissatisfaction theory when it was explained in the interview. They expressed a willingness to participate in an on-going collection of electoral data and were willing to provide a forum in which superintendents might learn about the dissatisfaction theory and how to apply it to their own districts.

CONCLUSIONS

Practitioners in the field of school administration have not received much information on the dissatisfaction theory. They are receptive to the theory when it is presented in enough depth and with enough detail to allow them to apply it to familiar situations. Their ability to understand and apply the theory seems greatly enhanced when it is presented with electoral data which is familiar to them.

The best format for superintendents to learn about the dissatisfaction theory would appear to be in graduate school studies where they can explore the literature in greater depth and breadth than they can in workshop sessions. Presentations and workshops also appear to be effective methods of educating superintendents about the dissatisfaction theory and its application.

In terms of presentation strategy, one hour to a large group is clearly insufficient. Superintendents were left with major questions of applicability or a strong rejection to the theory. These superintendents demonstrated the same incident-specific perception of conflict as superintendents who had no exposure to the dissatisfaction theory. They

tended not to offer explanations of conflict based on history or community change. They were mildly interested in receiving on-going information regarding the level of conflict in their district and in the state; they expressed a willingness to hear more about it, but felt they needed more help in making use of the information.

Superintendents appear to need multiple sessions, at least some of which allow an opportunity to ask questions and deal with specific applications in their own districts. Practical implications of the theory need to be pointed out explicitly in these presentations; however, presenters must be careful not to imply that electoral conflict leads inevitably to superintendent turnover.

Superintendents tend to receive the theory differently depending on their experience, especially in high conflict situations; those superintendents who have had little experience in high conflict situations tend to think that the theory is not very useful. Superintendents also seem to receive the theory differently depending on their perception of their role in relation to the board and the community; superintendents who are very controlling appear to reject the theory more strongly. With prolonged study of the theory, these superintendents seem to see the theory as a means to enhance their control through increasing their information about their communities.

Superintendents who are experienced managers of conflict attempt to anticipate conflict. They tend to make continuous

assessment of the level of opposition. The theory seems more useful and interesting to them if presented in terms of helping them anticipate conflict, read early signs of opposition and identify high risk situations. They expressed an interest in receiving annual information regarding the conflict level in their district and in the state.

It seems highly desirable to collect conflict information on a state-wide, on-going basis. It would help superintendents gain perspective on their own district and give state leaders a reading on the public's satisfaction with the schools as the state assumes a greater role in educational policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly, more aggressive efforts are needed if research and practice are to advance each other in the close relationship described by Lutz and Iannacone (1978). Researchers are presenting their work in formats not readily assimilated by practitioners. Practitioners are gaining their information from sources which have a meager theoretical basis.

The dissatisfaction theory needs to receive greater attention in the journals and meetings of professional associations of school administrators. Researchers need to present their work in journals which are widely read by practitioners and at workshops which are widely attended by practitioners. School administrators need to broaden the sources from which they gain their professional information.

Busy administrators need to take the time to explore scholarly research whether it be through graduate study or personal reading.

Programs of graduate studies for school administrators need to include emphasis on the politics of education. Specific classes, as well as including political topics in other classes on governance and community relations, would be highly desireable.

Specifically, in Washington State, an annual survey should be designed to gather electoral data from superintendents regarding their school boards. In exchange for their data, superintendents should receive a calculation of the conflict index of their district, districts in their region and districts of similar size or similar demographic makeup. This information would be most helpful after a period of time when longitudinal results could be returned to each superintendent. Educational efforts would be necessary to show superintendents the importance and potential uses of the data. Large group presentations and articles in newsletters could serve as awareness techniques and to solicit participation. Several follow-up sessions would appear to be necessary in order to teach superintendents to apply and use the data. These sessions need to be designed as workshops with opportunities to ask questions and explore individual cases.

If the relationship of research and practice offered by Iannacone and Lutz in their 1978 simile is to be achieved,

some changes must be made. More intense efforts are needed by both the leg of research and the leg of practice if the body of educational research is to move forward.

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